

Re LSRA Section 34 Consultation on Economic and Other Barriers for Early Career Solicitors and Barristers

June 2021

1. Introduction

The HEA welcomes Minister McEntee's commitment to reform legal education and to introduce measures that would remove barriers to becoming a solicitor or barrister. Equity of access to higher education is a fundamental principle of Irish education policy, and one that has been endorsed by successive governments in policy statements and commitments over the past thirty years. Current policy and priority actions are set out in the [National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021](#) ('National Access Plan')

The vision of the National Access Plan is to ensure that the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.

The plan identifies six main target groups (but also notes that there are many sub-groups within the target groups):

1. entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education;
2. first-time mature students;
3. students with disabilities;
4. part-time/flexible learners;
5. further education and training award holders; and
6. Irish Travellers.

The HEA and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science are currently in the process of drafting the next National Access Plan for 2022 – 2026.

2. Access to the Professions

Goal 4.4 in the National Access Plan is:

“to increase access to the professions, high-points courses and postgraduate courses by students from target groups.”

Increased access from the NAP target groups to the legal professions is therefore a national access to higher education priority. The LSRA has a specific statutory remit in relation to admissions policies for the legal profession. It would support the delivery of this objective if the LSRA implemented additional measures that would broaden or diversify access to the legal professions.

We note the findings made in the LSRA’s September 2018 review on the education and training of legal practitioners including:

- the recognition that the system of legal practitioner education and training “be open and accessible to new entrants” (p. 10) and that the “makeup of the profession reflects the full diversity of society (p. 11).
- how financial costs can act as a barrier to diversity in the legal profession (p. 15).

We also note and welcome the proposals made in the report:

- the development of a competency framework as a mechanism for authorising new providers and new routes to education (Proposal 4).
- new routes to qualification for non-law graduates using e.g., law conversion courses or new providers offering courses which do not require prior legal knowledge, but which would combine the academic and vocational stages of training (Proposal 9).
- encouraging greater diversity in the legal profession through the creation of new entry routes to qualification (Proposal 10).

The LSRA’s findings and proposals align with the objectives in the National Access Plan. Implementing the proposals would have the potential of opening the legal professions to a wider cohort of students, including in different locations throughout the country. Encouraging and allowing students to study on a flexible or part-time basis would be welcome. This would provide opportunities for learners who may not be able to pursue full-time programmes to access the legal professions. A more diverse landscape of providers and modes of study would be a first step to achieving greater equity of access for the NAP target groups to the legal professions.

